

Poison or Lead - A Crime Noir
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INT. BERNIE'S PRIVATE DETECTIVE OFFICE -- DAY (1942)

The scene is of BERNIE'S office. Although it's daytime, the office is dark with night coming through some SHADES and a FEW SMALL LIGHTS which create contrast with the objects within. The office is neat but crammed with various DETECTIVE MAGAZINES, BOOKS, CIGAR BOXES, and various NICK KNACKS that a detective may have. Bernie, a private Dick in his late thirties, burly and unkempt has his legs propped up on his DESK, FEDORA HAT over his eyes, and leans back on his CHAIR, thinking. He wears a LARGE JACKET with big POCKETS.

BERNIE (V.O.)

Perhaps I'll never know what Sir
Walter Scott meant when he wrote,
"Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive."
I do know deception though. I can
tell you on this day my office seeped
to the brink in it.

A woman, HALLEY, ENTERS. She is twenty, blonde, strong, beautiful and knows it. She slams the door open and runs into the office. Bernie almost falls off his chair.

BERNIE

Well, hello.

HALLEY

Hi. I need to hire you.

BERNIE

Sure. I happen to be available to
take a case. Depending on what it is
and, well, I don't come cheap.
Bernie's the name. Yours?

HALLEY

Halley. I saw your name on the door.
Bernie's an odd name for a Dick.

BERNIE

What's a good name for a Dick?

HALLEY

(Ignoring the question.)
Someone is going to try to kill me.

BERNIE

Really?

HALLEY

Yes.

(CONTINUED)

BERNIE

That would be a good reason to hire a private detective. Do you have any idea who?

HALLEY

(Hesitant.)

Yes.

BERNIE

Why not contact the police then?

HALLEY

I can't have them involved.

BERNIE

Mind telling me who you think it is?

HALLEY

You.

BERNIE

Me? Now, why would I do a thing like that?

HALLEY

I just know, that's all. Someone hired you to do the deed.

BERNIE

If I were hired to kill you don't you think its a bad idea to show up unannounced and tell me? If I were a person who would bump off a dame that would make the job too easy, wouldn't it?

HALLEY

Of course you're right. That's why I want to pay you more than the people who offered you the job.

BERNIE

(Interested)

What makes you think you have enough.

HALLEY

I should.

Bernie approaches her.

BERNIE

If what you say is true, why don't I just shoot you then take the money?

HALLEY

(Upset)

You wouldn't do that. You mustn't!

(CONTINUED)

Bernie holds her arm in his and draws closer.

BERNIE

You can relax. I can assure you, no one has paid me to kill you.

Halley moves closer to him.

HALLEY

If it isn't money, is there anything else I can offer to prevent my murder?

BERNIE

Like what?

HALLEY

Whatever a woman can offer.

Her lips approach his.

BERNIE

I told you, I -

Bernie sniffs for a moment. Then backs up.

BERNIE (CONT'D)

Hey. That smells like poison. Is that on your lips? What's the big idea?

HALLEY

Don't do anything foolish.

Bernie withdraws a PISTOL from his large jacket pocket.

BERNIE

No dame tells me what I can and cannot do. Clear?

HALLEY

I didn't have a choice! The boss wants you dead. I was told if I wanted an antidote to the poison on my lips, I needed to kiss you.

BERNIE

A fine nerve you have. Telling me that I was going to kill you when all the time the intention was yours to do me in.

HALLEY

I'm sorry.

BERNIE

Regardless, you're dead, if by poison or by my hand.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BERNIE (CONT'D)

In this case, by mine, because any
Copper will see that it was self
defense. I won't be had by any broad.

HALLEY

You could go to the police.

BERNIE

I could, but why get them involved
and invite other people to try where
you failed. I need to send a message.

HALLEY

No!

Without any further delay, Bernie shoots the Halley with his
pistol and she falls to the ground, clutching her chest which
now has BLOOD.

Bernie sets the PISTOL on top of his DESK and goes around
the desk to a DRAWER and pulls out a SECOND PISTOL.

He goes to Halley, bends down and checks her pulse.

At this time, three men ENTER. A BIG MAN holding a GUN, a
SLIM man with a GUN in his JACKET, and an ACCOUNTANT.

The big man points the gun at Bernie.

BIG MAN

Is she dead?

BERNIE

(Nodding)

Yeah. She's dead all right.

Bernie gets up and approaches the men.

BERNIE (CONT'D)

What do you guys have to do with it?
Why are you all here? And doesn't
anyone knock anymore?

BIG MAN

She was supposed to do a job. You've
been nosing around where you don't
belong.

BERNIE

Oh yeah?

BIG MAN

Yeah, you were talking to too many
people, my Accountant friend here of
mine included.

The Big Man tilts his head toward the Accountant.

(CONTINUED)

BERNIE

What did I find out?

BIG MAN

You should know.

BERNIE

I know working for the company you were skimming that I was getting close to your illegitimate money scheme.

BIG MAN

You need to be snuffed.

BERNIE

How did that involve the woman here?

BIG MAN

She oversaw the accountant that we hired to skim. Between your questions and her snooping around our accountant, we decided to take you both out of the picture. Slow acting poison should have done the trick without wasting a bullet.

BERNIE

Looks like it didn't work out that way, did it.

BIG MAN

No, things are getting messy. I don't like messy.

Bernie quickly takes out the second pistol from his jacket pocket and aims it at the Big Man.

BERNIE

Sorry to say I'm going to add to the mess. Since you tried to kill me through that woman and you have that gun's business pointed at me, if I take you out, I'd say it's self defense just like the way I took out the woman.

The bigger man raises his pistol. Bernie pulls the gun away from the Big Man and shoots him at the same time.

The Big Man falls dead.

Slim pulls out his gun while the Accountant runs out of the office and EXITS.

SLIM

Stop!

(CONTINUED)

Bernie now points his gun at Slim.

BERNIE

It looks like your partner was smart and scrambled. I think by now, Slim, you know I mean business.

SLIM

(Nervous)

I'm further away and a faster shot. You try anything with me and the best case will be that we are both dead.

Bernie looks down at the woman, still pointing the gun at Slim.

BERNIE

You can get up now.

Halley gets up from the ground, alive. Slim reacts, incredulous.

BERNIE (CONT'D)

You see, Slim, I'm way ahead of you. It's my job to know what's what. Though you thought you had that accountant, who ran out of here, strictly on your take, you were wrong. I had him on my take too. He was my mole and I found out some time ago of your plan concerning poison with the lady here.

HALLEY

Your accountant had told me of the plan with poison some time ago. Long enough to have an antidote taken which gave me immunity. To be safe though, I washed off the poisonous lipstick while you guys weren't looking and put on my own, safe lipstick.

Slim now nervously points the gun between the two.

SLIM

You're both wrong. That accountant is going to the car to get another gun. You'll both be sorry when he gets back.

HALLEY

(Puckering)

Would you like a kiss?

(CONTINUED)

BERNIE

Are you a gambling man, Slim? I wouldn't bet your future on it.

Bernie pauses for a dramatic moment.

BERNIE (CONT'D)

Well, you already are, I suppose, aren't you? You like having books doctored, right? You should have put your bet on black even and stayed pat, but instead you chose to get into the rather odd and unenviable red. If you were really a gambler or an accountant, you'd get that.

Halley holds Bernies arm that isn't holding the gun.

HALLEY

He scares me, Bernie, be careful, those are real bullets, and he means to use them.

BERNIE

Don't worry, you can relax. Baking the books is a whole different charge than murder and as it stands right now only racketeering will be on his record, if he plays it smart.

Bernie turns to Slim and raises his voice slightly.

BERNIE (CONT'D)

You get that, Slim?

SLIM

(Nods)

BERNIE

That accountant of yours, you should know, is not getting any gun, but is contacting a detective friend of mine whom I already alerted to the possibility of this entire scenerio a few hours ago.

SLIM

I don't understand. Why did you shoot the boss when it wasn't necessary.

BERNIE

Oh, I think it was. He most certainly would have taken me out. Besides, I know this guy. He's killed innocent people before and those types should be taken care of. I don't think you are a killer. Are you? I hope I don't change my mind about you.

(CONTINUED)

SLIM
 (Slowly shakes his
 head)
 I'm no killer.

There is a knock on the door.

BERNIE
 See? Some people are gentlemen and
 knock before they enter a man's place
 of business.

Bernie waves his pistol at Slim and the door.

BERNIE (CONT'D)
 Well? Go ahead and answer it.

SLIM
 Have her answer it.

HALLEY
 Okay. I'll do it.

SLIM
 Slowly. Don't want anyone to get
 shot unnecessarily.

Halley opens the door with one hand raised and the other hand on the knob. After it is open, she quickly puts both hands up and runs backwards away from the door. A POLICE DETECTIVE ENTERS, and draws his gun since he sees that Slim has a gun pointed at him. The Accountant also ENTERS behind the Police Detective.

POLICE DETECTIVE
 Put the gun down, now!

BERNIE
 You'd better turn that gun around,
 Slim, and hand the heat to the nice
 Police detective handle first, if
 you want to keep yourself from
 becoming cheddar cheese.

Slim hands over the gun, defeated. The Police Detective slips on handcuffs.

Slim looks desperately to the Accountant.

SLIM
 If you dare talk, I'll tell them how
 in addition to baking the books how
 you killed a man!

The Accountant makes his way to the gun on the desk and grabs it before anyone else can react.

(CONTINUED)

He shoots at Slim and everyone ducks but Bernie. Bernie turns to the Accountant.

BERNIE

(Laughing)

You're shooting a gun with blanks.

The Accountant looks impotently at the gun. Then he throws it at Slim who easily ducks and it veers past his head, missing him.

BERNIE (CONT'D)

(To the Police
Detective)

Looks like you better cuff this one as well. This guy you can pinch for attempted murder, though he's lousy at it.

ACCOUNTANT

You'll have to catch me first.

The Accountant makes a run for the EXIT.

The Police Detective decks him with a left hook that knocks him out.

BERNIE

Impressive. Looks like you'll need a medic as well as a jailkeep.

POLICE DETECTIVE

You should have been a fortune teller instead of a Private Dick, Bernie. It appears all this has gone down the way you said it would. How did you know that these men would follow so soon after you pretended to shoot the woman?

BERNIE

Easy. That accountant who got trigger happy a moment ago told me that they would make sure the woman killed me by poison. You see, they were listening through the wall of the bookstore which adjoins this office. They were listening the conversation between me and Halley since she first entered the room.

POLICE DETECTIVE

So you were both just acting.

Halley looks down to her hand full of 'blood.'

(CONTINUED)

HALLEY

I've got the ketchup stains to prove it.

POLICE DETECTIVE

Well done. I've got more questions for both of you at the precinct.

BERNIE

We'll be there in a bit. I just need to get a few things and tidy up the office.

All EXIT except for Bernie and Halley.

HALLEY

You think you're so smart.

BERNIE

You know I couldn't have done it without you. If you didn't cooperate and act like you were taking a bullet, I probably would have taken one myself.

Halley gets intimately closer to Bernie.

HALLEY

I may have taken one as well.

Her lips move close to his.

Bernie hesitates.

BERNIE

You sure it's safe?

HALLEY

Live dangerously.

They kiss.